



One in Ten Thousand

Island camping in the Everglades.

FISHING 24/7

Island camping means you get to catch sunset, a time when day-trippers are long gone. Blacktip shark, at right, is a frequent catch, on heavier tackle.



By Tom Levine

Just outside Chokoloskee, in southwest Florida, you'll find 10,000 islands—count 'em. Most of that number, you can only look at 'em, watch the current swirling around their mangrove edges and anticipate the fish you'll find there. But a few have beaches to pin your tent to while you're investigating the rest.

My son Ely and his friends got dragged out there recently by their womenfolk. A few of us got caught up in their wake. Two 18-foot skiffs, three couples and three extras just along for the fishing; more people than I ever wanted to go anywhere with, we headed for Pavilion Key.

Except for a waterfall, guava trees and a Krispy Kreme, Pavilion has all a sane person could ask for: Easy beaching for the boats and a tree canopy for a sheltered camp.

I'm used to bare bones camping out of a backpack or a canoe but this crowd had room for stuff. One great thing about a long roster, I learned, is somebody's bound to bring a screen tent. When the invigorating

breeze went belly-up on our last evening and something worse than pirates announced their presence, we said, "So what? Do your worst," and walked into the no-seum proof enclosure where we stuck out our tongues and tortured them for a change. And there were chairs! I kicked back after another incredible day fishing, sniffed the cooking aroma and waited for the next good thing to happen.

Right off I was warned by Eric, "Sara don't like no belching."

"For whom the belch tolls," I replied.

It was true enough about Sara but don't you know she's the first one to squeeze off something else and be proud of it? Untethered from normal society, outfishing the men, the women were in high spirits.

And so were we.

Fishing was fantastic. We caught over a dozen species, all the expected ones plus some surprises. Kristin broke the ice, then everybody had the excitement of landing his/her first goliath grouper, none without a brutal battle. **FS**



HIDDEN GEM DISCOVERY:

GLADES CAMPING

WHAT YOU'LL FIND: Solitude and spectacular fishing. View eagles, sea turtles, manatees, dolphin and more. See the old place of the notorious murderer Edgar Watson on the Chatham River. Camp and picnic there if you dare.

HOW TO GET THERE: Get a chart and plot a course through the backcountry. Watch for sandbars and oyster bars. Bring a compass and GPS. The Gulf is out there to keep you oriented; get lost, west is best. Head east, bugs will feast. We never managed to find a spot that wasn't good and not for want of trying. A tidal flow called the Chatham River was a favorite. Fish from the boat or pull up to a sand bar and wade. Slack tide was the only time for the bite to fade.

LODGING: Chokoloskee boasts a few marinas with boat ramps. For day trippers there are tent sites, RV spots and rental units with kitchen. Three miles north to Everglades City for restaurants. From mid November thru mid April, permits for backcountry camping must be bought in person (\$15 processing fee, plus \$2 per person) at the Everglades National Park visitor centers in Everglades City or Flamingo. No fees in summer, and you can self-register at either visitor center. Pretty brutal in summer, with the bugs and heat, but bring a screen tent, battery-powered fans. Shoot for the full moon and hope for a breeze; fish all night, sleep all day. See www.nps.gov/ever.

For organized tours and boat-assisted kayak fishing/camping, check out www.evergladesareatours.com.



Island overnight trip with Everglades Area Tours. Not really the place to be in summer (heat and bugs are relentless), but definitely a good bet November thru April. What you want to roast are marshmallows, left, not yourself.

HIDDEN GEMS

DRY TORTUGAS

Key West

The Best of the Florida Keys

Seaplane and ferry service had been restored in early June, along with general access by private vessels.

Way out in the Gulf of Mexico.

By Jeff Weakley

Florida's southernmost city is famed for big tarpon, Hemingway, IGFA records, an 8-month fishing tournament and sunsets at Mallory Square. But Key West has a secret: This is hardly the end of the Florida Keys.

Seventy miles west is a dreamscape for saltwater fishing, Dry Tortugas National Park.

There are seven more keys out there, the tiny and beautiful Tortugas (turtles, the Spanish called them). One is capped with a red brick Civil War-era fort. Stand atop that fort, swivel your head and admire 100 square miles of coral reefs, seagrass beds, blindingly white shoals and deep blue current-swept channels. Everything you might picture about beautiful water in the Keys—it's that and even more.

Only about half the park is open to fishing these days. Much of the western portion is Research Natural Area, contiguous with Tortugas Ecological Reserve North (well-marked on GPS charts). But the areas that are open are unbelievably rich with fish: 20-pound groupers in 40 feet of water, flag yellowtail balling up anywhere there's a dropoff, never-been-fished tarpon and permit cruising through, muttons on the sand, and big kingfish, as in tournament-topping 70-pounders!

You can do a day trip for sight-seeing on the *Yankee Freedom* ferry, or zoom over on a seaplane, but that'll just make you sick you aren't staying longer.

Best bet is to run your own boat. Park your trailer at City Marina at Garrison Bight and start your quest for the wild west. You might also run out of Fort Myers or Marco Island, if you're ready for the hundred-plus miles. As you might guess when looking at a chart, this is not really bayboat territory. This is big water, exposed to all kinds of



LAND OF GIANT GROUPERS

Benny Ortiz is a South Florida jig-fishing expert and social media figure who frequents the *Yankee Capts.* long-range trips out of Key West. Wonder why?



Camping out here is quite the adventure, and with a couple kayaks, you can see some great water.

HIDDEN GEM DISCOVERY:

DRY TORTUGAS NATIONAL PARK

WHAT YOU'LL FIND: Epic reef fishing, better than mainland Florida—better, really, than anywhere. Late summer is a great time, with the last of the predictably calm days. Gets dicey in the fall and winter—though the fishing can be spectacular then.

HOW TO GET THERE: Private boat, charterboat, ferry, seaplane.

LODGING: Campsite, or on your boat within 1 mile of Garden Key. Bring camping gear and possibly a small kayak (sometimes an option) on the park concessionaire ferry, *Yankee Freedom* (call ahead first—"months in advance," as recommended). Or: Fish and stay on the *Yankee Capts.*, the famous partyboat which runs out of Key West. A two-day Tortugas fishing trip starts at around \$600, plus meal plans, or pony up for the Pulley Ridge expeditions, exploring new grounds even farther out. See Yankeecapt.com.

weather (raging nor'westers in winter are to be avoided at all costs).

Fuel capacity and seaworthiness are essential concerns: There are no services out there. No fuel. No fresh water. You have to bring everything you'll need. You can camp at one of the sandy sites by Fort Jefferson, \$15 per night. There's limited space for boats there, so it's wise to prepare for at least one of your crew to sleep on the boat, anchored off in the harbor. Despite the isolation and logistical challenges, it can get crowded. Pick a couple of weekdays.

Anglers who've fished the Tortugas may have a hard time understanding why anyone would want to run a boat to The Bahamas. You don't need a passport to visit the Tortugas. "Deep dropping"—today, kind of another way of saying the shallow reefs are fished out—needn't be part of the gameplan in the Tortugas. The reef fishery here is WAY better than most of the Caribbean. No spearfishing, no lobstering. Keep it simple and you'll have a blast: Tackle in the 20- to 50-pound range, jigs, topwater plugs, circle hooks (if using natural baits), frozen chum, flats of sardines and herring, live shrimp for hogfish and snapper—basically any kind of fishing you like to do on reefs at home, you can do here. Trolling lipped plugs is great way to catch anything from grouper to kingfish. **FS**

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